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THE "MONSTER" EPISODE IN ADOMNAN'S *LIFE* OF ST. COLUMBA

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ABSTRACT: The story of St. Columba's supposed encounter with an aquatic beast, contained in Adomnan's *Life* of the saint, is critically examined and placed in historical context. Its cryptozoological relevance should be discounted. An actual event of ca. 580 A.D., reported from oral tradition 110 years later, can be postulated, but it would have been no more than the disturbance of some large, stray marine mammal in the River Ness, apparently at a ferry crossing near the Moray Firth river-mouth.

INTRODUCTION

Statements by almost every writer on the Loch Ness Monster suggest that the late 6th century sighting associated with St. Columba has now become almost an article of faith. No cryptozoologist has discussed this topic fully and critically, and only a few (Whyte 1957, Binns 1983) have bothered to look at (secondary) documentation instead of simply repeating assertions already published by others.

It is rare to find an author (though cf. Witchell 1975) who realizes that this is not the only allusion to unidentified aquatic creatures in early Irish and British secular or hagiographical literature. It would be unfair to expect zoologists to be familiar with what is admittedly a specialized area of historical and linguistic scholarship. This paper, from an amateur cryptozoologist who does happen to work professionally in the appropriate field of insular Celtic scholarship, hopes to offer a corrective view.

SUBJECT AND AUTHOR

In the mid-first millennium A.D., Scotland north of the Clyde-Forth (Glasgow to Edinburgh) narrowing was inhabited by peoples of Iron Age background identified in Latin sources as *Picti,* the Picts. Starting in the later 5th century, an area of western Scotland north of the Clyde was colonized from parts of Ireland, the settlers being known as *Scoti* or *Scotti*—whence, ultimately, the name "Scotland"—and their new realm as *Dalriada.* Initially pagan, they were converted to Christianity during the period 475 to 600 A.D. An Irish aristocrat from Donegal whom we know as Columba in Latin and Columcille in Irish (names meaning "dove" and "dove of the Church") was born about 521 A.D. He founded a major monastery at Derry in 545, and in 563 sailed with some companions to Dalriada. His monastic foundation at *Hy,* Iona, an islet west of the larger Isle of Mull, by the Argyll

coast, was not the only such church center provided for the *Scotti,* but it rapidly became the most influential and best known. Columba was its abbot, or absolute spiritual and legal ruler, until his death in 597.

During his long sojourn, he made visits to identifiable localities in the Isles and in western and northern Scotland, including at least one trip up the Great Glen to Inverness. Here he encountered the citadel of a Pictish king, Brude, probably sited in the hill-fort of Craig Phadraig, just west of Inverness. On one such journey, either arriving or returning, Columba visited a Pict named Emchat, whose home was *Airchartdan*; this is now equated with a living-site stratified below the present Urquhart Castle ruin overlooking Loch Ness, where excavations have dated levels by the C^{14} method of determination to the late 6th and late 8th centuries (Foster, Driscoll, and Alcock 1985). Craig Phadraig, also excavated, has produced finds of the same general phase (Small and Cottam 1972).

Just as the localities involved confirm, upon archaeological examination, activity at the dates that history would assign to them, so we can be certain that Columba was a historical person. The date-framework of his career, and of persons said to have been associated with him, can be established independently from non-Columban sources. (For a discussion of sources, see Anderson and Anderson 1961.) Adomnan (note the correct spelling) was another Irish cleric from the same extended family as Columba's, four generations on; he was born about 628 A.D. In the decade 660–70, he moved to Iona to become the community's ninth abbot. He returned to Ireland in 692, but later re-visited Iona, where he died in 704. The *Life of Columba,* his principal surviving writing, was composed between 688 and 692.

Adomnan, like Columba and most of the Iona brethren, spoke archaic Old Irish, an extremely complex Celtic language that in his own time was not written down and had no fixed spelling. He wrote in Latin, the conventional medium for the Church. As far as we can tell, the Picts had (or, in earlier centuries, had had) two languages, the main one being an archaic dialect of British, the ancestor of Welsh and Cornish. Between the Dalriadic Scots and the Picts, interpreters were necessary. The oral traditions on which Adomnan drew were, as the *Life* shows, mainly Iona-based—anecdotes of the founder's doings at two, or three, removes—but one should not rule out the possibility that traditional or factual accounts of events on the Scottish mainland, in the lands of the Picts, reached Iona and Adomnan from other sources, including Pictish ones.

THE *LIFE*

Adomnan's composition was not, and was not meant to be, a factual chronological narrative on the life of St. Columba. He was himself quite capable of "relatively high critical standards, good scriptural scholarship, and painstaking accuracy in the manipulation of his material" (Meehan 1958:

6), and the library at Iona held enough classical and biblical literature to enable him to formulate a respectable Latin prose style. Literary qualities were displayed in his earlier book *De Locis Sanctis* ("About the Holy Places"), a travelogue-guide to the Holy Land taken down from Arculf, a Gaulish bishop who somehow visited Iona. The sole purpose of the *Life* was, however, to confirm and to advertise the sanctity of Columba, offering proof of this under three heads—prophetic revelations, divine miracles effected through the saint, and appearances of angels with manifestations of heavenly brightness. The author assures us that, while omitting items for the sake of brevity, he has included nothing false, doubtful, or unsure. He would have been able to talk to people who, in youth, had known Columba's own friends, and, just possibly, to meet a few old men who had lived before 597.

The "monster" episode occurs in the second book of the *Life*. Forty-six miracles are related, arranged not in chronological order but in a fairly loose thematic grouping. After no. 25, we read that *Nunc de bestiis aliqua narrabimus pauca* ("Now we will relate a few things concerning animals"), and the next three miracles refer to a wild boar and some hunting dogs (26), an *aquatilis bestia* or "water beast" (27), and the absence of vipers on Iona (28). The context of the much-cited extract on the "monster" thus emerges, not as part of any constructed historical account, but as one minor literary trope within a deliberate and overt piece of religious propaganda. It remains to be seen what historicity it could possibly display.

The "Monster" Episode

I give a fresh and completely literal translation of this from the best (Schaffhausen) text of the *Life* (Anderson and Anderson 1961), with only the key words from the Latin italicized in parentheses.

About the repelling, by the power of the prayer of the blessed man (= Columba), *of a certain water beast.*

And again at another time, while the blessed man was tarrying for a number of days in a province of the Picts, he needed to cross the river Ness (*fluvium Nesam*). When he reached its bank, he saw some other inhabitants burying a wretched fellow whom, the buriers themselves said, a water beast (*aquatilis bestia*) a short time before had bitten with a most savage biting while it seized him. Certain men going to his aid in a little wooden boat, albeit too late, had caught hold of the unfortunate corpse with outstretched boathooks.

On hearing this, the blessed man nevertheless ordered that one of his own companions should, by swimming across, fetch a boat moored on the far bank by sailing it back. Listening to this command of the holy and outstanding man, Lugneus mocu-Min—obeying him without delay, and having taken off all his clothes except his tunic—threw himself into the water.

But the beast (*belua*), not so much satiated by what had gone before as whetted for prey, was lurking at the bottom of the river (*fluminis*). Feeling the water above it disturbed by the swimming, and suddenly coming up to the surface, it rushed with a great roaring and with a wide-open mouth at the man swimming in the middle of the stream-bed (*alveus*). On seeing this, the blessed man, together with all who were there—the barbarians as much as the brethren being struck with terror—drew the sign of the saving cross in the empty air with his upraised holy hand. Having invoked the name of God, he commanded the ferocious beast (*bestia*) saying "Go no further! Nor shall you touch the man. Turn back at once." Then indeed the beast, hearing this command of the holy man, fled terrified in pretty swift retreat, as if it were being hauled back by ropes; though just before this it had approached the swimming Lugneus so closely that, between man and beast, there had not been more than the length of a single small boat-pole.

Then the brethren, seeing that the beast had retreated and that their fellow-soldier of God, Lugneus, was returning to them unharmed and safe and sound in the boat, glorified God in the person of the blessed man with great wonderment. And the pagan barbarians who were there, too, impelled by the greatness of the miracle that they themselves had witnessed, magnified the God of the Christians.

Discussion

This tale, which we cannot pretend was included solely for the benefit of latter-day cryptozoologists, typifies Adomnan's style and the general character of lives of saints at this period. Its whole structure is entirely familiar. A savage creature—its dangerous nature advertised by the fact that it has previously attacked a human—is thwarted and repelled by the sign of the Cross and the name of the Almighty, the inherent and miraculous sanctity of Columba is again demonstrated, and by way of bonus some terrified pagans are led to acknowledge the greatness of God. The previous miracle in the *Life,* no. 26, is shorter but similar—a wild boar, a potential if not actual killer, is stopped in its tracks by Columba's uplifted hand and spoken invocation, and then falls dead at his command. Other Lives of the early British and Irish saints provide numerous instances, much on the same model.

These comments do not affect Adomnan's sincerity, nor his standards as an author. Insofar as this must represent a hard core of tradition gathered at Iona, certain details are clear. Lugneus, or Lugne, was a monk of Iona, a historical person and a younger associate of Columba, and Adomnan mentions him again as becoming prior of some other monastery in later life. If Lugne experienced an incident during his travels with the saint, he will have passed this on to Adomnan through (probably) not more than one intermediary.

The locality is, however, *not* Loch Ness. We must accept that, whether or not Adomnan ever visited Pictland himself, at Iona he would certainly have had access to the detailed geography of the whole Great Glen. Elsewhere he distinguishes Loch Ness as *lacus Nisae fluminis longus* ("the long lake of the river Ness"), and he knew that *Airchartdan* (Urquhart) was alongside *Nisae fluminis lacus* ("the lake of the river Ness"). By contrast, Lugne's adventure occurred on the River Ness proper. *Fluvius, flumen,* and *alveus* all mean "river," and the last word is a classical Latin term that implies a narrower stream between its banks.

The river in the story was apparently narrow enough for anyone to see a boat moored on the opposite bank, and to contemplate a quick swim across. This was at some spot where the local Picts normally congregated; where they had at least one other boat, *alnus,* literally a small craft made out of alder (perhaps a fisherman's little wicker-and-hide coracle); and where there were boat-hooks, if not ropes. In fact, the place was obviously some well-known traditional river crossing, where local fishermen used the narrows, and a punt or raft was kept for use as a ferry. The circumstances of Columba's visit tell us that he was on one or other of his trips to Brude's citadel. Craig Phadraig lies some two miles west of Inverness, and about two miles north of the River Ness. The spot in question is thus more likely to have been near the mouth of the River Ness—where it flows into the Moray Firth and the North Sea—rather than by its outflow at Lochend from the loch itself.

The monster is described throughout as *bestia,* and only once as *belua*—another classical word implying a creature marked by size, ferocity, or strangeness, and one used by several Roman writers as an appropriate way to describe an elephant. These words possess, as such, no particular reptilian, mammalian, or even marine significance. Adomnan is obliged to add that the beast was *aquatilis,* "aquatic" or "marine." This beast could swim, could dive or ascend and surface, move quickly, and respond to noise; it could make noises, bite, and, if too closely approached, it could attack or threaten a swimming person.

We hardly need recourse to cryptozoology to suspect that Adomnan was including a record of something that actually happened—if this is relevant, probably around 580 A.D.—and that Lugne had good cause to remember the occasion. The Iona monks were familiar with seals (*vituli*), and elsewhere in the *Life* there is reference to customary seal hunting, presumably for *Phoca vitulina,* at Staffa or the Treshnish Isles.

The *bestia* was probably a larger animal of the same general configuration, temporarily astray in a ferry-narrows near the Moray Firth mouth of the river. An isolated bearded seal, *Erignathus barbatus,* or even a walrus, *Odobenus rosmarus,* may be indicated. The huge destruction of walruses in the 19th century obscures the realization that, in earlier centuries, occasional individuals may be been carried far south (Ritchie 1920: 171), and that walrus remains are known from excavated sites in Orkney and Shetland (Clark 1952: 84). Whether or not one such specimen had actually caused the death of the hapless Pict, this postulated intruder probably threatened Lugne when he swam too close to it, and then vanished underwater when the saint shouted and gesticulated.

Other Accounts

The importance of Adomnan's *Life* lies partly in the very wide and influential circulation it enjoyed from the moment of its composition, and partly

because of its relatively early date (most similar "Lives" are later productions). Behind it lies, or lay, a now-lost compilation issued before 669 A.D. by the seventh abbot of Iona, Cuimine Ailbe. Adomnan drew on Cuimine's work for his third book, though this is less certain where the second book (the miracles) is concerned.

Another "Life" in Irish (as opposed to Latin), cast in the shape of a homily for Columba's feastday, may have been put together in the 10th or even later 9th century (Kenney 1929: 434). It was an Irish presentation of material to which Adomnan had given his earlier, Iona-centered, slant. Here the "monster" tale occurs in a much truncated guise. Columba is on a preaching tour through Scotland. One day, when he is addressing a host, a certain person tries to cross a river; before he can hear the word of God, he is bitten and killed while still in the water. The boy is brought before the saint, who makes the sign of the Cross with his staff over his breast, whereupon the seemingly dead lad arises.

The relevant sentence, in Irish, is: *Nos-benann in naithir he isin nusqui ocus nos-marbhunn focetoir.* A literal translation would be: "The *naithir* does bite him in the water and he does die at once." Here, the word *naithir,* in Old Irish more usually *nathir, nathair,* is the standard term for "snake, venomous serpent," and is cognate with Latin *natrix,* and for that matter with English "adder" (*an adder* was earlier *a nadder*).

By the 10th century, there were many "Lives" of saints in circulation in which snakes, or serpents, or dragons—terrestrial or aquatic, with or without wings, silent or bellowing—figured as stock properties in every variety of resuscitation or repulsion miracle (Cross 1954). No zoological nor cryptozoological weight can be attached to any of them. Their currency and popularity were enough to cause the insertion of a *naithir* into this late and muddled version of Lugne's swim for the boat.

Finally, there is a second, but also much later, Latin "Life" of Columba, contained in the 11th century collection known as the *Codex Salmanticensis* (Heist 1965). It is of some interest because its first nineteen chapters have been modified from a much older source; either Adomnan's *Life* (at one remove), or an early form of the existing Old Irish *Life.* The "monster" miracle occurs in chapter 8. Columba and his monks are in Pictland; they want to cross the river, but find that the necessary boat is tied to the far bank. A monk is told to swim over and get it. The creature duly appears. It can swim rapidly, has a fearsome appearance, opens its gaping maw and makes towards the monk, but it too is immediately dispelled by the sign of the Cross and the Almighty's name. Again, it is simply *atrocissima bestia,* "a very horrible beast."

The compiler, who omits any mention of native Picts standing around, very clearly pictures both a river and a traditional ferry crossing. The boat is neither *ratis,* "a raft," or *cimba,* an obscure word that ought to mean

"bell-like in shape" (early Irish bells in bronze or iron were trapezoidal in outline and rectangular in section).

Conclusion

There is no reason to doubt that, around 580 A.D., St. Columba and a party of monks including Lugne mocu-Min were on their way to visit Brude, travelled up the southern shore of Loch Ness and then intended to cross the River Ness by a ferry somewhere near its outflow into the North Sea; nor that Lugne, swimming over to fetch the raft or punt, probably encountered an alarmed and aggressive marine mammal of a species that the Iona monks did not recognize, doubtless a stray more at home in the Arctic or the waters of Spitzbergen. What this tale—included by Adomnan in perfectly good faith but with a strong religious slant—does *not* involve is any part of Loch Ness, or any reference to the unidentified animal or animals currently being investigated in that loch.

It would probably be too much to hope that future writers on the topic of the Loch Ness Monster will abandon this reference as irrelevant and misleading, but at least the readers of this journal will be in possession of an accurate critique of this interesting 7th century story.

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